

Foreign policy of Elizabeth I

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Abstract

This study examines the foreign policy activities of Elizabeth I (1741–1761) and their implications for the Russian Empire. Despite being one of the least researched topics in historiography, Elizabeth I's foreign policy holds significant importance, particularly in the context of the Russian Empire. Elizabeth's foreign policy exhibited several key features and orientations. She pursued the doctrine of Peter the Great, specifically in securing and expanding Russian control over Baltic territories. The Empress's foreign policy was influenced by her advisers, Jean Armand de Lestocq and Alexey Bestuzhev-Ryumin, and was characterized by a German orientation, primarily supporting Austria. Elizabeth actively participated in political coordination. In addition, the study explores the Empress's role in the election of the Holy Roman Emperor and her efforts to maintain friendly relations with Prussia and Austria during the War of the Austrian Succession, as well as Russia's participation in the Seven Years' War.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Elizabeth I, 18th century, foreign policy, Prussia, Austria

Introduction

Within the framework of this study, I would like to present the foreign policy activities of Elizabeth I (1741–1761), and the significant events and aspects of her reign. As in the case of the reign of the Empress as a whole, her foreign policy activities are one of the least researched topics of historiography. Despite this, I believe it is important to have more extended researches in this topic. In my opinion, Elizabeth I's foreign policy plays a particularly important role in the history of the Russian Empire, as it has many unique features. The active participation of Peter I (1689–1725) in diplomacy and foreign policy came to an end after his death. The Tsarist government pursued a policy of isolationism in foreign affairs during the period of the palace revolutions, from which it only managed to diverge in a few cases, but the emperors were not able to claim any major successes. This tendency was interrupted by Elizabeth's accession to power, as Russian influence in Europe increased during her reign. The Russian army was again reorganized and reformed in accordance with the model of Peter the Great.¹ The Russian Empire also represented a significant force in the two major conflicts of the period, the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–

¹ Schrek K., Az Orosz Birodalom déli határvédelme a 18. század végén. In: Veszprémy L. – Pósnán L. (eds), *Őrzők, vigyázatok a határra*. 2016. p. 165.

1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763).² By the end of Elizabeth I's reign, the Russian Empire had regained a position of great power in Europe and the Baltic region. Therefore, the foreign policy aspects of Elizabeth I's reign are in my opinion definitely a topic that should be examined more. In addition, the tsarina's ambitions were clearly preparatory and essential elements for the development of Catherine II's (1762–1796) great power policy.

Foreign policy from Peter I to 1741

The reign of Peter I is not only outstanding in terms of domestic policy, but also in terms of foreign policy, because the active foreign policy and the pursuit of great power status were prominent in his political activities. In fact, it could be said that it was primarily wars of conquest and the expansion of the borders of the empire that motivated domestic policy decisions. Peter's foreign policy had two main objectives: to have control over a warm-water port and expansion towards the Baltic. Therefore, it could be said that the traditional adversaries were Sweden and Poland.

At the beginning of his reign, he first began to expand southwards. His campaign against the Ottoman Empire, which lasted from 1695 to 1696, was intended to capture the port of Azov. Peter's attempt failed, as he was totally defeated. Thanks to a series of reforms to improve the Empire's naval and military capabilities, the second campaign to take Azov, which lasted from 1698 to 1699, was a success.³ The most significant conflict of Peter I's reign was the Great Northern War (1700–1721), initially fought against Sweden. It then escalated into a conflict involving almost all the powers of northern Europe, as well as Turkey. At the start of the war, Russia suffered a major defeat at Narva in 1700 by the armies of King Charles XII of Sweden (1697–1718).⁴ At this point, the Tsarist government appeared to be embarking on another losing war, but Peter did not give up his foreign policy objectives, and after the defeat he continued a slow northward expansion. The warring parties clashed at Poltava in 1709.⁵ The decisive battle of the Great Northern War ended in a huge Russian victory and a near-devastating defeat for the Swedish.⁶ The conflict in Northern Europe ended in 1721 with the Treaty of Nystadt, a clear agreement recognizing the Russian victory. The tsarist government succeeded in adding Estonia, Livonia and Ingria to the empire. In addition, a great power shift took place in the Baltic States (Sweden replaced Russia),⁷ and Peter I changed the name of his country to the Russian Empire.⁸ Thanks to the peace treaty, Russia had a wide maritime access, which allowed it to engage

² D. Lieven, *The Cambridge History of Russia. Vol. II. Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*. Cambridge University Press, New York 2006. pp. 505–507.

³ M. Heller, *Az orosz birodalom története I*. Osiris Kiadó, Budapest 2003. pp. 314–318.

⁴ Dinnyés P., *Az orosz nagyhatalmiság a 18. század elején*. In: Várkonyi, Péter; Reichmann, Angelika; Tarnóc, András (eds.), *Válogatás a XXXII. OTDK (2015) történelem- és társadalomtudományi dolgozataiból*. Eszterházy Károly Egyetem Líceum Kiadó, Eger 2016. p. 15.

⁵ Gebei S., 1709. június 27. (július 8.) – Poltava. *Hadtörténeti Közlemények* vol. 122/4, 2009. pp. 903–939.; Varga B., *A poltavai csata hatása az ukrán történelemben*. In: Mészler T. – Sashalmi E. (eds.), *A poltavai csata jelentősége az orosz és a svéd történelemben: konferenciakötet*. Pécsi Tudományegyetem BTK, Pécs, pp. 101–123.

⁶ Font M. – Krausz T. – Niederhauser E. – Szvák Gy., *Oroszország története*. Budapest 2001. p. 232.

⁷ P. Bushkovitch, *Poltava's Consequences: Local Autonomy in the Russian Empire during the Reign of Peter I*. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* vol. 31/1–4, 2009. pp. 135–158.

⁸ P. R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and its peoples*. Toronto 2010. pp. 277–279.

in Baltic trade and to earn substantial revenues. At the end of his reign, the Tsar also tried to extend his power towards Asia. Between 1722 and 1723 he conquered the western coast of the Caspian Sea.⁹

After Peter I's death, not only the reforms he had implemented in domestic politics, but also the great power status that had emerged from his active military activities, began to disintegrate. A peculiarity of the age of the palace revolutions was that the domestic and foreign policy of the tsarist government was determined by the relationship of the ruler to Peter I and his reforms. In addition, the nobility played an important role and the influence of the Guard became unquestionable.¹⁰ In general, there was no unity of political direction in the period, neither in matters of Russian domestic affairs nor in foreign affairs.¹¹ As a consequence, a certain isolation in foreign policy characterized the diplomatic activity of the Russian government after 1725. In addition, the Russian Empire's military activity was limited mainly to the Ottoman Empire and to minor confrontations with Eastern European countries (Sweden, Poland) that traditionally belonged to the Russian sphere of interest.¹² However, the foreign policy of the Russian Empire in this period could not be considered as successful.¹³

After the death of Peter I, his wife Catherine I (1725–1727) succeeded him on the throne. The Empress mainly tried to continue Peter I's policy of centralization. During her reign, Ostermann was at the head of the Russian government's foreign policy. However, no major European military or diplomatic events can be related to Catherine's reign. In terms of foreign policy, there was a marked departure from the course of Peter's reign, as the focus shifted from the Baltic region to Polish and Turkish affairs.¹⁴

The short reign of Anna I (1730–1740), who succeeded Peter II (1727–1730),¹⁵ remains a negative image in historiography. During the reign of the tsarina, Biron, Ostermann and Münich played a decisive role. It can also be noted that the foreign policy activity of the Russian Empire was relatively significant. The Russian Empire sought to extend its influence to Poland and to affect the election of the new king.¹⁶ However, the Russian-friendly candidate did not succeed in the parliamentary elections and the Tsarist government decided to take military action. During the campaign, the Russian forces also managed to capture and tax the city of Danzig.¹⁷ At the end of the Empress's reign, she also engaged in armed conflict with a traditional adversary, the Ottoman Empire. During the Russo-Turkish War, which lasted from 1735 to 1739, the Tsarist government did not achieve any significant successes, but managed to retain the port of Azov, which had been captured by Peter I and

⁹ Lieven, *The Cambridge History of Russia...* pp. 499–500.

¹⁰ Heller, *Az orosz birodalom története.* pp. 333–335.

¹¹ N. V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia.* Oxford University Press, New York 2000. p. 219.

¹² Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia.* p. 233.

¹³ W. H. McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier.* Chicago – London 1975. p. 128.

¹⁴ Font – Krausz – Niederhauser – Szvák, *Oroszország története.* pp. 255–256.

¹⁵ Cathrine I was succeeded on the throne by Peter II between 1727 and 1730. His short reign is of little relevance to the subject of this study.

¹⁶ N. Davies, *God's playground: a history of Poland in 2 volumes. The origins to 1795.* Oxford 1983. pp. 504–505.

¹⁷ D. R. Stone, *Military History of Russia from Ivan the Terrible to the War in Chechnya.* London 2006. pp. 63–64.

annexed to the Empire. However, this was only achieved at the cost of considerable human and material sacrifice.¹⁸

Main features and orientations of Elizabeth's foreign policy

Elizabeth's twenty-year reign introduced a significant change, as Russian influence in Europe increased during her reign. Following Elizabeth's orders, the Russian army was reorganised and reformed along the model of Peter the Great.¹⁹ It can be clearly concluded that the Russian Empire was a very powerful force in the two major conflicts of the period, the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War.²⁰ The opening up of foreign policy during the reign of Elizabeth I was already developing before she came to power, as she was in close contact with both the Swedish and French ambassadors.²¹ According to the Swedish plans, in return for military support, Elizabeth would hand over territories under Russian control to Sweden after gaining power. The Swedish ambassadors' efforts to do so remained unfulfilled. Elizabeth, with very good diplomatic instincts, negotiated only verbally, but never signed any written document regarding the Swedish demands.²²

During her reign, there were basically two persons who influenced the foreign policy orientation of the Russian Empire alongside the Empress. One of them was Jean Armand de Lestocq, a court physician of French nationality, who until 1745 played a decisive role in promoting the interests of the French court in Elizabeth's entourage. After Lestocq's downfall, the unquestioned influence of Alexey Bestuzhev-Ryumin was established.²³ As a result, Russian foreign policy was characterized by a German orientation, primarily a supporting policy towards Austria, which determined the foreign policy of the Russian Empire for a very long time.²⁴ It is also important to emphasize that the Empress not only relied on her influential advisers in the area of foreign policy, but also actively took part in the political coordination herself. The fact that on certain matters no decision could be taken without her approval and that she always read the reports of the envoys with great pleasure and attention proves her active role in politics. All in all, we can say that Elizabeth herself had outstanding diplomatic instincts and was a great diplomat.²⁵

The Empress issued a very significant manifesto at the moment of her accession to power, on the morning of 25 November, announcing that she had "taken the paternal throne." In this way, she legitimized herself as the daughter of Peter I, which was also a declaration of her political agenda.²⁶ Elizabeth I's activities as a monarch demonstrated that she was indeed the successor to her paternal legacy, as she had proclaimed in the manifesto issued at the beginning of her reign, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. The Empress clearly wanted to implement the centralization and modernization of Peter the Great

¹⁸ Stone, *Military History of Russia...* pp. 64–67.

¹⁹ Schrek, *Az Orosz Birodalom déli határvédelme a 18. század végén.* p. 165.

²⁰ Lieven, *The Cambridge History of Russia...* pp 505–507.

²¹ V. P. Naumov, Elizaveta Petrovna. In: *Voprosy istorii.* Tom. 5. 1993. pp. 57–59.

²² E. V. Anisimov, *Elizaveta Petrovna.* Moscow 2000. pp. 48–51.

²³ Anisimov, *Elizaveta Petrovna.* p. 290.

²⁴ A. V. Man'ko, Elizavetino vremja. *Brachnyesozjuzy Doma Romanovyh Veche.* 2010. pp. 9–10.

²⁵ Anisimov, *Elizaveta Petrovna.* pp. 307–310.

²⁶ PSZ – *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossijskoj Imperii.* Tom. XI. No. 8473. pp. 537–538.

in domestic policy.²⁷ Moreover, her foreign policy was characterized by a rapprochement with Europe and a revival of the Russian Empire's status as a great power. In this case, too, the Empress's foreign policy was clearly characterized by the doctrine of Peter the Great, which had already been visible before she gained power, as she refused to give up part of the Baltic territories in exchange for Swedish support.²⁸

Throughout her reign, the tsarist government pursued a number of different directions in foreign policy. One of the main objectives was to follow the doctrine of Peter the Great, which was to secure the Baltic territories.²⁹ In this regard, Elizabeth's empire was successful, as she not only managed to keep the territories that had previously been under Russian control, but also to expand them. In 1743, according to the peace treaty that ended the Russo-Swedish conflict, part of Finland was ceded to the Russian Empire.³⁰ In addition, the examined documents show that Elizabeth I pursued a very active foreign policy in 1745. The primary evidence of this is the fact that letters from almost every court in Europe were sent to the Russian Empress, keeping her constantly informed of important political news from the European courts.³¹ In addition, a number of envoys from the Empress's court served at the imperial courts. The envoys acted as observers, forwarding messages and letters from the Empress, and constantly reporting on the current situation and relations back to St Petersburg.³² Although the main orientation of the Empress's foreign policy was European, there were envoys not only to the European courts, but also in the East, for example in Persia. The envoys constantly sent reports to the Tsarist court on the situation of the Tsarist troops, their state of war and their reorganization, and even their further direction of advance.³³

In the foreign policy of Elizabeth I, the Tsarist government sought to assert its influence and interests in cases such as the election of the Holy Roman Emperor. The election of Francis of Lorraine (1745–1765) as emperor took place in 1745, and the Russian Empire clearly wanted to be actively involved. Thus a strategy had already been formulated in the case of the death of his predecessor, Charles VII (1742–1745).³⁴ In the election of the Holy Roman Emperor, Elizabeth I had intended Hermann Karl von Keyserling to play the leading role, with his primary task being to attend the electoral meeting, represent Russian interests and keep the Russian government informed of current developments.³⁵ The Russian Empire's primary foreign policy interest in the title of Holy Roman Emperor was to keep the crown in the Austrian House, but the Tsarist government adopted a 'wait-and-see' tactic

²⁷ Varga B., Az orosz közigazgatási rendszer bevezetése Ukrajnában 1654–1835 között. *Acta Universitatis Scientiarum Szegediensis. Acta Historica* 141. 2017. pp. 63–75.

²⁸ Anisimov, *Elizaveta Petrovna*. pp. 52.

²⁹ Niederhauser E. – Szvák Gy., *A Romanovok*. Budapest, Pannonica 2002. p. 114.

³⁰ Rambaud A., *Oroszország története. Eredetétől kezdve 1884-ig. II. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia* 1890. pp. 71–72; Naumov, *Elizaveta Petrovna*. p. 69.

³¹ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. Protokoly priemov imperatricej Elizavetoj Petrovnoj rukovodstva Kollegii Inostrannyh del v 1745. *Rossijskij Arhiv*. Tom. XVI 2007. pp. 78–82.

³² Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 74.

³³ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 78.

³⁴ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 76.

³⁵ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. pp. 75–76.

and did not exclude any of the candidates or give its clear support to any of them.³⁶ The Russian government's political interest in maintaining friendly relations with all the states of Europe is also very clear in the case of the election of the Emperor. Despite the fact that they did not publicly oppose anyone, behind the scenes they were reluctant to support the Polish king's claim to the throne. They sought to promote Russian interests and to convince other European powers of the negative consequences of such a move. The Russian Empire's arguments included, among others, that if the Polish king and the Holy Roman Emperor were one and the same person, this eventuality would threaten to disrupt and seriously damage the peace between the Nordic states. Therefore, in order to avoid conflict, the Russian government would not support the claim to the throne of the King of Poland.³⁷

The War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War

In terms of the Empress's foreign policy, the main objective here was again the doctrine of Peter the Great, which was to retain the Baltic territories.³⁸ They were not only successful in maintaining but also in increasing the territory they occupied, as under the terms of the peace of 1743, which ended the Russo-Swedish conflict, a part of Finland was given to the Russian Empire.³⁹ Since the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, the Austrian War of Succession had been going on, and the warring parties had sought to win the support of St Petersburg. Simultaneously, in the Russian court, the rivalry between the various interest groups began.⁴⁰ The War of the Austrian Succession was the first European conflict in a long time in which the Russian Empire showed its influence and strength.

From the sources, which relate to the Empress's foreign policy activities in 1745, we can clearly determine the direction of the Empress's foreign policy, her attitude to the war and the primary interests of the St Petersburg court. All in all, the tsarist government tried to maintain friendly relations with both Prussia and Austria. It therefore maintained active relations with both warring parties, but the Russian Empire did not commit itself to either of the two alliances. The main reason for this type of attitude is that the Russian Empire was not prepared to intervene in a European war of this scale. After the coup of 1741, the Empress did not have stable political control at the beginning of her reign. She had many unresolved issues to deal with, and after the coup she had to handle domestic political issues. In addition, she had to deal with Ivan VI's supporters, as there were numerous conspiracies against her.⁴¹

The Russian government's clear objective on both sides was to maintain good and friendly relations with the warring parties without military intervention. This is evidenced by the fact that, although there were several requests for military assistance from the Prussian court, Elizabeth always tried to avoid direct military support and politely declined it in all cases. She tried to manage all this in such a way that the Russian Empire could maintain its friendly relations with Prussia.⁴² One of the motives for this decision was the possible

³⁶ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 77.

³⁷ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 88.

³⁸ Niederhauser – Szvák, *A Romanovok*. p. 114.

³⁹ Naumov, *Elizaveta Petrovna*. p. 69.

⁴⁰ Niederhauser – Szvák, *A Romanovok*. p. 114.

⁴¹ Anisimov, *Elizaveta Petrovna*. pp. 109–159.

⁴² Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 77.

disruption of Russian-Swedish relations, which would be against the interests of the Tsarist government.⁴³ The Empress's decision was probably also influenced by the military condition and unpreparedness of the Russian army. St Petersburg also received a request for help from the court of Saxony, which was also rejected.⁴⁴ The main reason given by the Tsarist government for this decision was that it might lead to a further escalation of the war between the Prussian monarch and Maria Theresa. However, in order to maintain good relations with the Saxon court, the Empress agreed to try to intervene in the Prussian court to protect Saxon interests. She did this in such a way that the Tsarist government would not harm the interests of the Prussian king, thus ensuring that Prussian-Russian relations would remain friendly.⁴⁵

Moreover, the Tsar's foreign policy was primarily interested in ending the war. A possible prolongation of the conflict threatened that the Russian Empire would be drawn into the war militarily, which did not coincide with the interests of St Petersburg and the Tsarist government. To achieve these objectives, Empress Elizabeth offered to mediate between the warring parties.

The major step forward in Tsarist foreign policy came only during the Seven Years' War. The Seven Years' War was the global war of the era, since it was a conflict that affected not only Europe itself, but also the colonial empire.⁴⁶ Elizabeth's government fought against Prussia as an ally of Austria. The significance of this is that the alliance with Austria, established during the reign of Elizabeth I, became a key element of Russian foreign policy for centuries.⁴⁷ During the war, Russian troops achieved major victories over Prussian troops, partly as a result of military improvements.⁴⁸ The Russian Empire succeeded in gaining East Prussia, where the integration into the empire began immediately. Then, despite the initial successes, the war dragged on. The Russian army was characterized by slow movement and an avoidance of engaging in battle. In 1758, the warring parties clashed at Zorndorf in a battle that resulted in enormous losses for both forces.⁴⁹ In 1759, the Russian troops managed to defeat the Prussian forces at Kunersdor, and in 1760 they entered Berlin and taxed the city.⁵⁰ At this point, it seemed that the war was lost for Prussia. But the death of Elizabeth in 1761 meant a turning point, as her successor Peter III was obsessively Prussian-friendly.⁵¹ Over the course of the Seven Years' War, it would seem that the Russian Empire gained nothing and made blood sacrifices for nothing. This claim is partly correct, since St Petersburg did not gain anything in comparison with the losses of Russian forces and the cost of the war, since the territory of the Russian Empire did not grow. However, with this war, and the successful action in the war, the prestige and the political influence of the Russian Empire in Europe enormously increased.

⁴³ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 72.

⁴⁴ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 72.

⁴⁵ Memuary, perepiska, dokumenty. p. 75.

⁴⁶ Font – Krausz – Niederhauser – Szvák, *Oroszország története*. pp. 269–270.

⁴⁷ Naumov, Elizaveta Petrovna. p. 71.

⁴⁸ Niederhauser – Szvák, *A Romanovok*. p. 120.

⁴⁹ Anisimov, *Elizaveta Petrovna*. pp. 594–636.

⁵⁰ Man'ko, *Elizavetino vremja*. p. 12.

⁵¹ Heller, *Az orosz birodalom története*. pp. 388–389.

Summary

The foreign policy activities of Empress Elizabeth I and the foreign affairs of her reign are important and interesting in the history of the Russian Empire. During her reign, Russia became a major power in Europe and managed to maintain the position of great power in the Baltic region that it had previously achieved under Peter I. The results of the foreign policy pursued during Elizabeth's reign were also essential in establishing the great power policy of Catherine II. In the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748), Elizabeth I sought to maintain a neutral policy and to cultivate a friendly relationship with both warring parties. By the end of the war, Russia had clearly strengthened its relations with the Habsburg Empire. In the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), Elizabeth supported the Habsburg Empire against Prussia. Russian forces played an active part in the war and took a major part in the conquest of Prussian territory. The successes achieved in the war helped to strengthen Russia's position in European politics. Under Elizabeth's reign, Russia stabilized and strengthened its relations in the European power structure, and it became clear that the country's support could be crucial in a military conflict.

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